

Hans-Georg
Gadamer

The
Beginning
of Knowledge

THE BEGINNING OF KNOWLEDGE

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Hans-Georg Gadamer

THE
BEGINNING
OF
KNOWLEDGE

Translated by Rod Coltman

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Translator's Preface

In his autobiographical sketch, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*,¹ Gadamer tell us that, even while studying with Heidegger in Marburg, Paul Friedländer was teaching him to read Plato as a literary writer and not just a philosophical one. And while his 'Heideggerization' was to profoundly determine the course of his own philosophical development, Gadamer's doctoral training under Paul Natorp had already placed him within a Platonic horizon from within which he would appropriate and interpret the phenomenological ontology of his new mentor. This, of course, is why (working against the Heideggerian idea of a monolithic 'history of metaphysics' in need of dismantling) Gadamer can situate such figures as Plato and Hegel at the center of his philosophical hermeneutics. I would also argue that this early philological training combined with his own literary sensibilities allow Gadamer to emerge as a deeply Platonic thinker—not in the traditional sense of a teleological metaphysician but in the literary sense, that of a writer who is keenly attuned to the structure and movement of language.

To illustrate what I mean, let us briefly examine Plato's role in his own dialogues—not just as the writer, not as a character per se or as a direct interlocutor, and certainly not in terms of the simplistic identification of Socrates with Plato that plagues traditional Platonistic readings and even many extremely sophisticated (pun intended) contemporary analyses of the dialogues. Plato, I would argue, is omnipresent in these philosophical dramas. He is indeed, as most Plato scholars would have it, Socrates and the Eleatic stranger, but he is also Glaucon and Adeimantus, Euthyphro and Meletus, and even Callicles and Thrasymachus.

1. Translated by Robert R. Sullivan, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985. Originally published as *Philosophische Lehrjahre: Eine Rückschau*, Frankfurt a. M., Klostermann, 1977.

He is Gorgias and Protagoras and Parmenides himself. He is even the cicadas singing in the Plato trees, watching over Socrates' pastoral and erotic encounter with Phaedrus as well as Diotima, the wise woman of Mantinea who taught Socrates the art of love. All of these are literally Plato's voices in that he wrote their words, but they are also his voices in that the interlocutors' interactions with Socrates (or whoever is leading a given discussion), far from being superfluous, not only determine the direction of the conversation but the ideas presented by these other characters, even by Socrates' 'antagonists,' are frequently not simply undermined or destroyed but (to mix dialectics) *aufgehoben*, sublated, only to reemerge as a crucial facet of a later dialogical construct.²

I am trying to suggest here that Gadamer's profound understanding of the literary as well as the philosophical aspects of the Platonic dialogue manifests itself in all of his own writings. Gadamer will be the first to admit that he is not the literary genius that Plato was (whom Gadamer puts on a par with Goethe and Shakespeare), but we can perhaps think of him as something of a historical genius. That is, insofar as he *theorizes* about what he calls 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), he also *depicts* it (or perhaps 'enacts' it) in each and every one of his texts, and this is certainly as true of his elucidations of historical figures in shorter pieces such as the ones presented here as it is of his more elaborate explications of his own philosophical attitude such as we find in *Truth and Method*. Unlike Plato's virtuosic polyphony, however, Gadamer's voices are not those of contemporary figures placed into fictional contexts for philosophical and pedagogical effect, but those of historical figures situated in their own hermeneutical contexts for philosophical and pedagogical effect.

Gadamer's primary voices, his primary muses, his three-headed Socrates, if you will, are Heidegger, Hegel, and Plato. His Heideggerian voice is expressed or 'brought to language'³ in his historical, phenomenological, and ontological interpretation of consciousness. His Hegelian voice is brought to language in his

2. The most obvious example being Polemarchus' idea, in the *Republic*, of doing good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies.

3. 'Zur Sprache gebracht,' as the German locution so eloquently puts it.

historical and speculative/dialectical understanding of the movement of *die Sache selbst* and the occurrence of the phenomenon of understanding as a non-teleological *Aufhebung* that arises not in logical propositions but in live conversation. And Gadamer's Platonic voice comes to language in both his dialogical/dialectical interpretation of history and the analogical pedagogy of his historical presentations of philosophical figures.

And this, I think, is crucial for understanding Gadamer's other voices—Kant, Herder, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Augustine, Aquinas, Aristotle, and, of course (for the purposes of the present volume), Heraclitus, Parmenides, Democritus, and the other so-called Presocratics: Gadamer's pedagogy, like Plato's, is frequently analogical but never didactic. Just as Plato allows the dramatic setting and the personalities of the interlocutors to drive the discourse of the dialogues, which must always take 'the longer way' if it is to be effective,⁴ Gadamer's project has always been to allow the tortuous trajectory of what he calls 'the forgetfulness of language' to show itself throughout the history of philosophical discourse. In other words, whether he is 'theorizing about' philosophical hermeneutics, as in *Truth and Method*, or 'applying it,' as he does in the essays below—if such a distinction makes any real hermeneutical sense—Gadamer is always and everywhere concerned with the lack of sensitivity to language and context that characterizes most traditional scholarship. But, of course, what is forgotten is not gone, only covered over, hidden; and in large part, the essays presented in this volume bring Gadamer's immense philological acumen to bear on a question with enormous philosophical and even scientific consequences—specifically, the question of the extent to which the tradition itself has largely forgotten (or at least missed) the fact that linguistic as well as historical, cultural, political, and religious contexts have determined and continue to determine our understanding of philosophical thought before Plato.

The pieces translated and presented here function as a sort of companion volume to *The Beginning of Philosophy*,⁵ at least

4. In fact, if we look closely, we can discern one of Plato's favorite analogies operating in many of the dialogues—i.e., the idea that, just as Odysseus learns only by following the tortuous path laid out for him by *Moirai*, the conversation must be allowed to sail wherever the wind takes it.

5. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998;

to the extent that here, too, Gadamer offers us a series of philologically and philosophically grounded interpretations of Presocratic thought by penetrating the veneer of the doxographical tradition from which we have inherited these testimonies and to the extent that, together, these two little books represent the only two extended publications on the Presocratics in Gadamer's entire corpus to date. However, their own rather more straightforward doxographical history sets these essays apart from those of the previous volume. The earlier texts were a series of previously unpublished lectures that were originally offered as a lecture course in 1967, reworked and delivered publically in Italian in 1988, and then transcribed and edited for publication in Italy in 1993 before being translated back into German for republication in 1996. All of the present essays (except for the Author's Preface) have appeared in print elsewhere, and all but the last piece are included in Gadamer's 10-volume *Gesammelte Werke*.⁶

The philosophical focus of *The Beginning of Knowledge*⁷ is also slightly different from that of *The Beginning of Philosophy*. As the word 'knowledge' (*Wissen*) in the title suggests, here Gadamer is not so much interested in the origins of philosophy per se but rather those of knowledge in general—or at least its origins in the Western tradition. In *The Beginning of Knowledge*, Gadamer reminds us that philosophy for the Greeks was not just a question of metaphysics and epistemology, but it also encompassed cosmology, physics, mathematics, medicine, and the entire reach of theoretical curiosity and intellectual mastery—everything, that is, that we call 'science' and the Germans call 'Wissenschaft.' Whereas *The Beginning of Philosophy* deals with the inception of philosophical inquiry as such by focusing primarily on the history of the reception and interpretation of Parmenides' didactic poem, *The Beginning of Knowledge* brings together nearly all of Gadamer's previously published

originally published in German as *Der Anfang der Philosophie*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996.

6. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1985–1991, hereafter referred to as GW, followed by volume and page numbers. (A complete list of textual citations appears at the end of this volume).

7. Originally published in German as *Der Anfang des Wissens*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999.

(but never before translated) essays on the Presocratics. Beginning with two hermeneutical and philological investigations of the Heraclitus fragments that are rather similar in scope to his previous analyses of Parmenides ("On the Heraclitus Tradition," from 1974, and "Heraclitus Studies," from 1990), he then moves on to one of his very earliest pieces, a discussion of the Greek atomists ("Ancient Atomic Theory," 1935) and a more recent treatment of the Presocratic cosmologists ("Plato and Presocratic Cosmology," 1964). In the last two essays ("Greek Philosophy and Modern Thought," 1978, and "Natural Science and the Concept of Nature," 1994/95) Gadamer puts these previous discussions into perspective for us by elaborating on the profound debt that modern scientific thinking owes to the Greek philosophical tradition. Just as in *The Beginning of Philosophy*, however, Plato continues to act as Gadamer's general point of entry into the Presocratic tradition. Not only does Plato provide the basic model for his project of bringing these various historical voices to language, but Gadamer recognizes that Plato's own appropriations of the Presocratics in the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, and elsewhere, while typically overshadowed by those of Aristotle and subsequent the Hellenistic and Scholastic traditions, actually offer us the earliest intact accounts of these earliest of Western thinkers. This is not to say that we should simply adopt Plato's interpretations verbatim; but Gadamer's point is that we should never take the views of Aristotle, Simplicius, and Diogenes Laertius in this way either. In fact, from the causal agenda of Aristotle's own physics of substance to the religious agenda of Medieval Scholasticism, the Aristotelian tradition lays down so many layers of interpretation—often in the guise of direct quotation—that our view of the Presocratics has become extremely calcified and monolithic. According to Gadamer, Plato's renderings of the Presocratics, while certainly colored by their own philosophical perspective, offer us a pathway into these citations and fragments that can help us peel away and examine some of the layers of this philosophical and (as he reminds us) poetic palimpsest. For the key thing to understand when reading Gadamer on the Presocratics is that because he also reads the Platonic dialogues against the grain of the scientific tradition begun by Aristotle, and if by 'Presocratic' we mean before the advent of Platonism, Gadamer's Plato is himself something of a Presocratic thinker.

I would like to thank my editor at Continuum, Frank Oveis, for putting up with the seeming procrastinations of a community college professor whose teaching load often makes it difficult for him to meet translation deadlines. But I also want to thank my great friends Russell Winslow, for his draft of "Plato and Pre-socratic Cosmology," and Sigrid Koepke, without whose drafts of "Greek Philosophy and Modern Thought" and "Natural Science and the Concept of Nature" I might still be working on this book. However, as much as I appreciate their inestimable help in this endeavor, I myself assume sole responsibility for any and all errors and inconsistencies in the following translations.

Rod Coltman
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June 2001

Author's Preface

Thanks to the work of Professor Vittorio De Cesare and Dr. Joachim Schulte, my 1988 Naples lectures (delivered in Italian and published in 1993 under the title, *L'inizio della filosofia occidentale*) have since appeared in German as *Der Anfang der Philosophie* (Reclam, 1997).¹

We all know (or think we know) that the history of philosophy begins with Thales of Miletus, and we justifiably cite Aristotle (*Metaphysics* A) as our authority. And, thanks to Schleiermacher and Hegel, ever since the German Romantic period we have called these beginnings of philosophy 'Presocratic.' We know, however, that what has been handed down to us as the earliest philosophy are really only quotations or fragments of texts.

In my Naples lectures I wanted to show that we can only speak of this fragmented Presocratic tradition if we keep in mind the first philosophical texts that were actually received. These texts are mainly a question of the Platonic dialogues, on the one hand, and the enormous mass of Aristotle's writings, the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, on the other. Nevertheless, there is one exception among these fragments of the tradition, namely, the largely coherent text of the beginning of Parmenides' didactic poem. We owe this text to a reliable transcription by a great scholar from the last generation of ancient Greek scholars, an important member of the Academy in Athens by the name of Simplicius. He lived shortly before the dissolution of the Plato's Academy and left behind a series of commentaries, the most eminent of which were on Aristotle's *Physics*.

Centuries later, Athens is supposed to have fallen victim to the advance of Islam, at the hands of which even the eastern

1. [And these have since been translated into English and published as *The Beginning of Philosophy* (Continuum, 1999).]

Roman empire of Byzantium found its end. Nevertheless, this glorious locus of Greek thinking signified a very important point of release for the establishment of Italian humanism and the advent of the Renaissance. In truth, humanism and, above all, our tradition of Greek culture had their earliest beginnings in antiquity with the rise of Rome. After the victorious repulsion of the Punic threat, the circle of Scipio inaugurated a new direction for Roman society and a new education for its youth patterned on the Greek model. We need only recall the works of Cicero. In the time of the Caesars, Greek culture even experienced such a diffusion and consolidation of all things Greek that, generally speaking, one spoke Greek exclusively in the courts of the Roman Caesars. We owe this fact to that most brilliant thinker of this 'Hellenistic' epoch, Plotinus, whose students then successfully perpetuated this heritage for hundreds of years within an enduring Roman Empire. Above all, however, we owe the fact that Greek culture was transmitted to modernity to the later expansion of the Christian Church and the culture that developed from it through the disciplined work of the monks.

It is still fateful and decisive that only the first part, the introductory part, of Parmenides' didactic poem came to us along these paths. In reality, however, in his transcription of the text (which was found in Athens), Simplicius follows right along with the underlying fact that, in his *Physics*, Aristotle generally paid attention only to this introductory piece of the didactic poem, which is all that has survived. The entire text was composed in hexameters, the classic poetic language of Homer. The introductory verses of this earliest surviving piece show Parmenides the thinker to be a great writer who, through the mouth of a goddess, at once announces and grounds the great truth of being: the complete nothingness of the nothing. The far more extensive part of the didactic poem (which we do not have) gave evidence of contemporary cosmology and astronomy, but, like the individual fragments, it probably also dealt with the experience of the world that is disclosed to human beings. Apparently, to follow the instruction of the goddess would be to reject the nothingness of the nothing. She probably depicted the changing phenomena of nature with its wonderful rhythmic riddle of day and night, manifestation and obscurity. We can assume that the subsequent image of the world developed by Parmenides was surpassed in the mean time by the progress